Mid-County Farm & Feed
128 S. Twin City Highway
Nederland, TX 77627
(409) 722 - 4933

Composting at Home: A Beginner's Guide

"If we composted many of the things we throw away, such as kitchen scraps, grass clippings, leaves, and other landscape debris, we could divert 20 to 30 percent of the trash currently going into landfills." - Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service; AgriLifeExtension.tamu.edu

What Is Composting? Composting is the natural process of recycling organic materials such as food scraps, leaves, and grass clippings into a nutrient-rich soil amendment called compost. Compost improves soil health, helps retain moisture, and reduces household waste.

Benefits of Composting

- Reduces the amount of waste sent to landfills
- Improves soil structure and fertility
- Helps soil retain water
- Reduces the need for chemical fertilizers
- Supports healthy plant growth

What Can Be Composted?

Greens (Nitrogen-Rich Materials) - These materials provide nitrogen and help compost heat up

- Fruit and vegetable scraps
- Coffee grounds and filters
- Tea bags (if compostable)
- Fresh grass clippings
- Plant trimmings

Browns (Carbon-Rich Materials) - These materials provide carbon and help maintain airflow

- Dry leaves
- Straw or hay
- Shredded newspaper
- Cardboard and paper towels
- Small twigs

Aim for a Balance: A good rule of thumb is **2–3 parts browns to 1 part greens.**

Composting with Manures

Animal manures can be an excellent source of nitrogen and beneficial microorganisms for a compost pile. When used correctly, they help speed decomposition and create a nutrient-rich finished compost.

Good Manures for Composting

● Chicken manure
● Rabbit manure
● Cow manure
● Goat manure
● Horse manure (without herbicide contamination)

Use with Caution

● Chicken manure is very high in nitrogen and should be mixed with plenty of carbon-rich materials such as leaves, pine straw, or shredded paper.

● Fresh manure can be too "hot" for plants and may burn roots if applied directly to the garden.

Avoid

● Dog waste
● Cat waste
● Human waste
● Manure from animals that may have consumed feed or forage treated with persistent herbicides

Composting Tip

A simple manure compost recipe:

● 1 part manure
● 2–3 parts dry leaves, straw, pine straw, or other browns

Allow manure-based compost to fully mature before using around vegetables and edible crops.

What Should NOT Be Composted?

Avoid adding:

- Meat, fish, and bones
- Dairy products
- Oils and greasy foods
- Pet waste
- Diseased plants
- Weeds with mature seeds
- Chemically treated wood

How to Start a Compost Pile

Option 1: Compost Bin Use a purchased or homemade bin with ventilation.

Option 2: Compost Pile Choose a level, well-drained area outdoors.

Basic Steps:

1. Start with a layer of browns.
2. Add greens.
3. Alternate layers of browns and greens.
4. Keep the pile moist (like a wrung-out sponge).
5. Turn the pile every 1–2 weeks to add oxygen.

Building a Simple Compost Bin

Compost bins can be made from inexpensive materials and adapted to fit almost any space.

Option 1: Wire Compost Bin

Materials

● 10–12 feet of welded wire fencing
● Zip ties or wire clips

Instructions

1. Form the fencing into a circle approximately 3–4 feet wide.
2. Secure the ends together.
3. Place directly on the soil.
4. Add compost materials and turn as needed.

Benefits

● Low cost
● Easy to build
● Excellent airflow

Option 2: Wooden Pallet Bin

Materials

● Four pallets
● Screws, wire, or heavy-duty zip ties

Instructions

1. Stand three pallets in a U-shape.
2. Attach a fourth pallet to the front.
3. Fill with compost materials.
4. Leave gaps between boards for airflow.

Benefits

- Inexpensive
- Uses recycled materials
- Easy to expand into a multi-bin system

The Three-Bin Composting System

For gardeners who generate a large amount of leaves, grass clippings, garden debris, or livestock manure, a three-bin system is one of the most efficient ways to produce compost.

Bin 1: Active Pile

This is where new materials are added.

Add:

- Kitchen scraps
- Grass clippings
- Leaves
- Plant debris
- Animal manures

Continue filling until the bin is full.

Bin 2: Composting Pile

When Bin 1 is full, move the materials into Bin 2.

This pile is actively breaking down.

Tasks:

- Turn every 1–2 weeks
- Monitor moisture levels
- Watch temperatures rise and fall

This stage is where most decomposition occurs.

Bin 3: Finished Compost

After the compost has mostly broken down, move it into Bin 3 to cure.

Finished compost should be:

- Dark brown or black
- Crumbly and soil-like
- Earthy smelling
- Cool to the touch

This compost is ready to use in gardens, flower beds, containers, and lawns.

Benefits of a Three-Bin System

- Keeps compost organized
- Makes turning easier
- Produces a continuous supply of compost
- Separates fresh materials from finished compost
- Ideal for gardeners, homesteaders, and small farms

Composting in Southeast Texas (Zone 9a)

Our warm climate allows composting nearly year-round.

Summer

- Compost piles heat quickly.
- Monitor moisture levels carefully.
- Turn piles regularly to maintain airflow.

Winter

- Decomposition slows but rarely stops completely.
- Continue adding materials.
- Expect longer composting times.

Local Materials to Use

- Live oak leaves
- Pine needles
- Grass clippings
- Vegetable scraps
- Garden trimmings
- Livestock manures
- Hay and bedding from coops or barns

Troubleshooting Common Problems

Problem	Possible Cause	Solution
Bad odor	Too many greens or too much moisture	Add browns and turn pile
Pile not heating	Too dry or not enough greens	Add water and nitrogen-rich materials
Flies or pests	Food scraps exposed	Cover scraps with browns
Compost too wet	Poor drainage or excess greens	Add dry browns and turn pile

When Is Compost Ready?

Finished compost is:

- Dark brown or black
- Crumbly and soil-like
- Earthy smelling
- No longer recognizable as original materials

Depending on conditions, compost can be ready in **2–12 months**.

How to Use Finished Compost

- Mix into garden beds before planting
- Add around vegetables, flowers, and shrubs
- Top-dress lawns
- Blend with potting soil for containers

Quick Composting Tips

✓ Chop materials into smaller pieces for faster breakdown
✓ Keep compost moist but not soggy
✓ Turn regularly for faster results
✓ Add a variety of materials
✓ Be patient… Nature does the work!

Remember: Composting doesn't have to be perfect. Even a simple pile of organic materials can produce valuable compost for your garden while reducing waste.